

Recognition of Multiracial Children's Literature

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Abstract

Young people of mixed race are the fastest-growing demographic in the United States. Yet publishers create far fewer multiracial children's books than would be warranted by the group's numbers. Librarians and other champions of children's literature compound this lack of representation by neglecting to highlight and track multiracial works. In particular, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) fails children of mixed race by declining to monitor multiracial children's books in its annual diversity statistics report. This essay affirms the importance of racial representation in children's literature, positions multiracial children's literature within larger conversations about diversity in the genre, and argues for recognition of multiracial children's literature in the CCBC's authoritative reports.

Keywords: children's literature, racially mixed people, juvenile literature, literature and race, race identity

Recognition of Multiracial Children's Literature

Representation matters. In children's literature, it matters especially because stories shape emerging identities. Children need to see themselves in literature, just as they need to develop empathy with characters unlike themselves. In a set of foundational metaphors, educational innovator Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) framed the problem as one of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors; some books reflect children's lived experience, while others allow them to imagine seeing or stepping into unfamiliar worlds. To ensure that children of diverse backgrounds can find books reflecting their experience and to help all children connect with each other, educators and librarians have long called for greater racial diversity in children's books.

For decades, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) has led the charge for racial diversity, gathering annual data on the creators and topics of new titles and highlighting those by and about people of color (Salem, 2021). Recently, the CCBC expanded its services by adding new categories of diversity and launching databases with sophisticated search functions to locate diverse books (CCBC, 2018). However, the center's services leave a gaping hole. The CCBC neither tracks nor reports on multiracial children's books. Yet, multiracial Americans are the nation's fastest-growing demographic group (Bola, 2020). While the CCBC has lagged behind this shift, parenting blogs have stepped in with multiracial booklists, reader sites such as Goodreads have made it easy to search on "mixed race," and the advocacy group Diverse BookFinder has begun to produce data on multiracial picture books. Amid these encouraging signs, the CCBC's failure to track and report on multiracial children's books robs the movement of much-needed momentum. Consequently, this essay will argue that it is past time that the nation's leading authority on diversity in children's literature lend its weight to support multiracial children's books by recognizing them in its annual statistical count.

Definitions

One cannot read far in discussions of diversity and racial identity before discovering that the terms in use are messy: overlapping, ill-defined, and in dispute. In establishing definitions for this project, I have tried to protect meaningful distinctions while retaining the complexity of the language in practice. When forced to choose between a broader or narrower meaning, I have aimed for inclusivity.

Biracial With an identity of two races. Because this is the most common form of multiracial identity, biracial is often used interchangeably with multiracial or mixed-race.

Children's literature Literature intended for children to young adults, a deliberately flexible range. In the absence of a consensus on defining characteristics of the genre, I follow Hintz (2020) and Gubar (2011) in keeping the term broadly inclusive to encompass everything from the earliest board books to young adult fiction that engages with sexuality and other complex challenges of emerging adult identity.

Culture The customs, institutions, arts and practices of a particular social group (Nayani, 2020).

Diversity Forms of difference, especially as distinguished from norms or dominant groups in sociological factors such as race, class, culture, ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, ability, and faith (WNDB, 2021).

Ethnicity A relatively fluid identity that may be anchored in kinship, culture, religion, language, or common heritage (Valdez & Golash-Boza, 2017). Ethnicity frequently tracks with national origin, such as Irish or Chinese. Prior to 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau recognized just one ethnicity, Hispanic or Latino. However, in 2020, the Census began encouraging respondents to write in ethnicities as modifiers of race. For instance, if a respondent checked "White," the Census suggested "Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian" (U.S.

Census Bureau, 2020). As the census form indicates, ethnicity is frequently conflated with race (Valdez & Golash-Boza, 2017).

Race A socially constructed and externally imposed system of categorization based on German naturalist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's 1795 classification of people into five groups, which track roughly into the modern categories of Europeans or Caucasians, Asians, Pacific Islanders, Africans, and Native Americans (Chang, 2016). Without biological basis, this racial taxonomy persists both as a bureaucratic force through documents such as the U.S. Census and social forces such as systemic racism (Saini, 2019; Tattersall & DeSalle, 2011).

Multicultural When applied to works of literature, multicultural describes works by or about historically underrepresented or marginalized groups. Tending to focus on ethnicities, multicultural indicates fewer forms of difference than a term such as diversity (Hahn, 2015). As compared to multiracial, which typically describes more than one race within a single individual, multicultural generally refers to works that may themselves be monocultural but contribute to the representation of cultures across literature or other fields as a whole. Librarians may favor this term because the Library of Congress acknowledges multiculturalism as a subject heading, but does not grant this status to diversity, multiethnicity, nor multiracialism.

Multiethnic Of more than one ethnicity. Typically refers not to individuals but to groups in which all individuals might be monoethnic. Just as race is frequently collapsed into notions of ethnicity, multiethnic is often paired with the term multiracial, a particularly confusing practice because multiethnic typically refers to groups, whereas multiracial more often refers to individuals with more than racial identity. To reduce such confusion, I prefer to use the term diverse rather than multiethnic.

Multiracial or Mixed-race With an identity of two or more races, also known simply as mixed (Nayani, 2020). This paper engages with the concept of multiracial identity primarily at the level of individuals who identify with more than one race and books that reflect their experience.

Multiracial Identity

As a group, multiracial Americans are expanding at an astonishing pace. Between 2000 and 2010, the mixed-race population grew 32%, and the U.S. Census Bureau expects that the 2020 data will show a jump of another 36% (Jones & Bullock, 2012; Jones & Smith, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). For the moment, the total numbers remain small: just 9.0 million people – 3.0% of the population in 2010 – declared a multiracial identity (Jones & Bullock, 2012). However, the Census Bureau projects that by 2060 mixed-race residents will account for 6% of the U.S. population and 11% of children under age 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). If 11% does not sound like much, consider that it is about twice the percentage of Asian American children currently in the United States (Child Trends, 2018). Just as it would be impossible to discuss contemporary American society without acknowledging Asian Americans, it should soon become impossible to ignore mixed-race Americans as a key demographic force. Already, the Associated Press (AP) and other major media have taken notice of the new group (AP, 2009).

Though multiracial Americans live throughout the United States, they are strongly clustered in certain regions. Most mixed-race Americans live in the West or South, with the largest group by far living in California. In 2010, 1.82 million Americans of mixed race lived in California, almost three times the number in Texas, home to the next-largest multiracial population (Jones & Bullock, 2012). In fact, the Los Angeles metro area alone had more mixed-race Americans than did Texas or any other state. Outside such clusters, multiracial Americans are scattered across the nation, with 34 states hosting fewer than 200,000 multiracial residents

and every U.S. county home to at least one (Chao Romero, 2019). This population distribution indicates that while many mixed-race Americans live in communities where it would be easy to find people sharing their heritage, other Americans navigate multiracial life very much alone.

Part of the current growth in multiracial demographics results from a significant shift in social behavior: Americans have been intermarrying at historically high rates. Analysis by the Pew Research Center reveals that 17% or about 1 in 6 of all new marriages in 2015 united couples of different races or ethnicities, lifting the frequency of intermarriage to 1 in 10 of all married couples (Livingston & Brown, 2017). By contrast, in 1967, the year that *Loving v Virginia* overturned state laws on miscegenation, just 3% of newlyweds married someone of a different race or ethnicity (Livingston & Brown, 2017). The trend toward intermarriage has been fueled by population growth and marriage rates by Asians and Hispanics, groups historically inclined toward intermarriage. However, the phenomenon also benefitted from dramatic changes in the behavior of Blacks and Whites. Since 1980, Whites nearly tripled their rates of intermarriage to 11%, while Blacks more than tripled to 18%. Because many interracial unions lead to multiracial children, mixed-race persons under 18 are an especially fast-growing demographic group (Mather & Lee, 2020).

While the birth of multiracial children powers demographic change, much of the growth in the multiracial population represents a redescription of adults of mixed-race. Only recently have multiracial Americans had the option to document their full heritage (Brown, 2000). The 2000 Census was the first time that the U.S. Census Bureau allowed Americans to declare more than one race (Jones & Smith, 2001). Previously, the Census instructed Americans of more than one race to choose a dominant identity, with parents of mixed-race children pressed to decide on their behalf. Chafing at this restriction, more than 500,000 Americans flouted this instruction in

the 1990 Census and marked more than one race (Roth, 2005). Another 2 million marked “Other” (Moore, 2001). The desire to represent their children’s full identity led activists to pressure the Bureau to allow respondents to declare more than one racial identity (Roth, 2005). The change broadened the choices for everyone, offering a decision that could hold great emotional power. “When the census recognized mixed-race people, I felt as if my country could finally see me; it mattered to me more than I thought,” wrote author E. Dolores Johnson (2017), who was in her 50s when the revised Census debuted (para. 1).

The 2000 shift in Census guidance led other institutions to make room for multiracial identities, triggering broader social awareness. In 2007, the U.S. Department of Education instituted “choose one or more” as its required description for collecting racial data (NCES, 2007). Eventually, this change prompted the College Board to adapt its data collection. In 2015, for the first time, multiracial students sitting to take their SATs were able to acknowledge more than one racial identity (College Board, 2015). The SAT change was especially appropriate because American college campuses include more mixed-race people – 8% of first-year students in 2008 – than are found in the general population (Hochschild et al., 2011). Fueled by such numbers, American campuses increasingly host multiracial student groups, which in turn have spurred the development of multiracial and multiethnic centers and studies (Chao Romero, 2019; González Britt, 2019). In recent years, a growing number of institutions such as the University of Hawaii and Duke University have joined the pioneering University of California at Berkeley to offer courses in critical mixed-race studies, bringing scholarly analysis and awareness to mixed-race experience (Powell, 2005; Riley, 2021).

Working against new opportunities to identify as multiracial are centuries of enforced hypodescent, the notion that in the case of mixing between White and nonWhite persons, any

children must be identified with the nonWhite race. Also known as the “one-drop rule,” hypodescent has its roots in slavery, when most mixed children were born to slave mothers raped by White owners. The goal of hypodescent was to prevent mixed children from enjoying White privileges (Johnson Connor, 2004). Such obsessive racism may be seen at work in documents such as the 1870 Census, which charged census takers to report if they noted any observable trace of African blood, and the 1890 Census, which required citizens to declare if they were mulattos, quadroons, or octoroons (Schor, 2017). Terms such as mulatto and octoroon did not indicate an attempt to create a separate, mixed identity, but rather another, insistent way of asking if the respondent should be considered Black (Schor, 2017). Although the Census Bureau dropped mulatto from its forms in 1930, hypodescent continued as government practice in other forms. As recently as 1988, birth certificates of babies born of White and non-White parents automatically assigned the child to the non-White race (Chang, 2016). Even in contemporary times, the erasure of Whiteness continues: the Census Bureau’s oft-cited prediction that America will be majority non-White by 2045 relies on the assumption that mixed children should be labeled non-White (Mather & Lee, 2020).

While the U.S. Census form and other governmental documents have relaxed classifications to allow for more than one race, the one-drop rule remains powerful in both majority and minority populations, especially for multiracial children of Black heritage (Herman, 2011). According to DNA testing services, the average African American has between 19% and 29% European ancestry (Gates, Jr., 2013). Yet, as a group, African Americans are not encouraged to identify as multiracial (Townsend, 2009). While Whites have used the one-drop rule to protect privilege, Blacks sometimes invoke it altruistically. For example, they may label some multiracial individuals as Black as a way of welcoming and protecting them from shared

discrimination by the White majority (Ho et al., 2017). Hypodescent can also be used by minority communities as a way to protect the numbers of marginalized groups. In debate leading up to the 2000 Census revisions, one option considered was adding “multiracial” as its own category. This possibility produced strong opposition from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which expressed concern that a multiracial category would weaken civil rights and dilute political bargaining power (Williams, 2006). Reaching the same conclusion, White conservatives such as commentator George Will and then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich welcomed a multiracial category as a way to reduce racial identifications (Thornton, 2009). Ultimately, the Bureau dropped the idea of a separate category in favor of a “check all that apply” approach, and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) announced that people who checked multiple boxes would be counted as minorities (Herman, 2011).

Despite strong historic pressure to choose a monoracial identity, Americans increasingly embrace more complex and fluid racial descriptions. Herman (2011) documents a long list of factors that can influence racial self-identification, including ancestry, appearance, family socialization, socioeconomic status, options provided, and how respondents think the data will be used. Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2002) observe a Protean model of racial identity among many Black/White biracials, who shift identifications according to social context. Similarly, Doyle and Kao (2007) recognize multiracial identity as both symbolic and situational, while Terry and Winston (2010) note that time, context, and the social meaning of race can impact racial self-identification. One strong predictor of racial identity is the race of a multiracial child's parents. For children with a White and nonWhite parent, identification often tilts White if the nonWhite parent is Asian, Hispanic, or Native American, but tilts Black if the nonWhite parent is Black (Alba et al., 2018; Bratter, 2007). A significant proportion of multiracial adolescents resist racial

categorization of any kind. Among biracial youths surveyed by Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2002), 13% described themselves transcending race.

Increasingly, young Americans may interpret race as simply one among many forms of difference. In a survey of college students asked about ethnicity and ancestry, responses included “usually Black, sometimes biracial,” “adopted Chinese into an Indonesian and Filipino Family,” and “gay Jewish Cuban American” (Hochschild et al., 2011, p. 156). None of these responses align with old, fixed categories of race, and all demand a system that makes room for multiple identifications. Such responses confirm young Americans’ comfort with complex and shifting racial identities.

Challenges of Multiracial Identity

“Being biracial isn’t hard because we’re confused about our identity. It’s hard because everyone else is confused” (Gaskins, 1990, p. 14).

Thus does one 14-year-old explain the predicament of growing up mixed-race in America. No matter how comfortable multiracial adolescents may be with a nontraditional racial identity, they cannot escape external pressures to supply a fixed response to the all-too-common question, “What are you?” Even after providing a response, multiracial adolescents commonly face authenticity tests from family, strangers, and peers – Can you speak Chinese? Have you ever visited Guatemala? – along with pressure to choose among parts of themselves (Nayani, 2020). My own daughter, with ancestors from India, Germany, and the Czech Republic, was challenged to speak German by a blond classmate who refused to credit her European heritage.

Such real-life obstacles fuel long-running, exaggerated stereotypes by which biracial people are doomed to drift, unwelcome by either race. Termed the tragic mulatto or marginal man (Park, 1928; Brown, 1933), these inventions have been so pervasive that Gardner and

Hughey (2019) find them in magazines in contemporary times. In 2021, the female counterpart, the tragic mulatta, may be seen in the film revival of Nella Larsen's *Passing* (Alolaiwi, 2017).

Tragic tropes present multiracial identity as a problem that can never be solved.

In a powerful counterforce to gloomy assumptions and external pressures on multiracial experience, psychologist and educator Maria Root (1996) created the Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage. First published a generation ago, the document has gained force in mixed-race scholarship and on the Internet, where it is widely reposted on sites such as Mixedremixed (2017) and on social media such as Facebook and Reddit. Among other prerogatives, the document grants a mixed-race person the rights "not to justify my existence in this world/Not to keep the races separate within me" (Root, 1996). The Bill empowers mixed-race people to claim their own identities – "I have the right to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify" – and to describe themselves in ways that can be individual and fluid: "I have the right to create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial or multiethnic/To change my identity over my lifetime – and more than once" (Root, 1996). Both prophecy and propellant, this Bill of Rights empowers multiracial Americans to declare complex and fluid identities.

Optimism is warranted because, despite shared challenges, multiracial adolescents do not experience widespread disadvantages. Multiracial adolescents not only match their monoracial peers in self-esteem but also recognize social rewards to their mixed-race identity (Campbell & Eggerling-Boeck, 2006). Similarly, many biracial youth consider their mixed heritage an opportunity rather than a threat (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) (2016), multiracial children are as emotionally strong or stronger than their monoracial peers. In particular, multiracial children who are allowed to identify with all aspects of their full heritage report greater levels of

happiness than children forced to name a dominant identity (AACAP, 2016). Given the choice, most biracial children prefer to identify as biracial, rather than choosing one group (Rockquemore & Brunσμα, 2002). As recent Census data demonstrate, provided an opportunity to acknowledge their full racial identity, many Americans will do so.

The Role of Multiracial Books in Identity Formation for Multiracial Children

Books play a key role in identity formation. With decades of research, educators have established that good readers make connections between what they read and their own experiences and communities (Strauss, 2014). The ability to connect with reading material is strongly associated with children's performance in reading comprehension, motivation, and developing self-concept (Flemming et al., 2015; McNair, 2013). The relationship between reading and identity formation underwrites Bishop's framework of books as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors – metaphors that continue to shape and motivate the movement for greater diversity in children's books (O'Donnell, 2019). "Reading becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books," writes Bishop (1990), making plain the price of a fruitless search: "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (p. ix).

Books and other media can play an especially important role for multiracial children, who may otherwise lack models for families and experiences like their own. The AACAP (2016) advises that parents can alleviate social pressures on mixed-race children by locating books, textbooks, and films with positive multiracial protagonists. The group's advice is telling because, while it points to the importance of upbeat mirroring media, it also acknowledges the difficulty

of finding such resources. The AACAP assumes that parents will need to make an effort and that children would not find such materials on their own.

The AACAP's professional advice is echoed by parents who have raised multiracial children. When Meghan Markle announced her first pregnancy with Prince Harry, the *Washington Post* published an opinion piece in which parents of multiracial children offered tips to the parents-to-be (Smith-Kang, 2019). The top suggestion was to "find books and media that look like your child" (Smith-Kang, 2019, para. 8). This advice came before recommendations to find a social community, talk about cultures, foster traditions, or explore the world. Whether despite or because it was rare, multiracial media was considered vital: "There isn't a huge plethora [of books] to choose from, but they're out there," reported one parent (Smith-Kang, 2019, para. 8). Such testimony speaks to the need for guides to multiracial books.

Multiracial adults offer strong anecdotal evidence of the pivotal role of multiracial literature in their understanding of themselves. Often such moments come surprisingly late. Mackie (2020), a Scottish-Filipina, was an undergraduate when she first "felt represented by a piece of media" (para. 1), reading Han's (2014) teen novel, *To all the boys I've loved before*. Biracial scholar Johnson Connor (2004) was in graduate school when she first read a book with a biracial focus, Walker's (2002) memoir, *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a shifting self*. The experience was so transformative that Johnson Connor devoted her dissertation to studying the effect of reading books with biracial characters on adolescent biracial girls. Even for adults, children's books can be greatly empowering. In an Amazon review of the 2019 multiracial picture book *Honeysmoke*, a customer confided, "I'm 27 and read this book for the 5-year-old me who was lost and insecure about being biracial and not knowing what that meant or how I fit in" (Kira, 2020). Children's books wield an uncanny power to unlock emotional truths.

Because multiracial children's books have been so scarce, some multiracial adults do not encounter them until they are parenting. Ashia Ray, founder of Books for Littles, reports that she was 30 years old and navigating her early months as a new mother when she saw her first normalized depiction of a multiracial family in a picture book, Birkett's (2010) *Cook it!* "We would go on to read another few hundred more books before we found another, but after that – I was on a mission to find more," she writes (Ray, 2020, para. 11). Ray's determination underscores the significance of multiracial children's literature encountered at any age.

The Diversity Movement in Children's Literature

For nearly a century, people of color in the United States have advocated for more and better representation in children's literature. In 1922, African American historian and journalist Carter Woodson founded Associated Publishers in Washington, D.C., to produce authentic books about African American life and history (Salem, 2021). Around the same time, Puerto Rican librarian Pura Belpré began a six-decade effort to promote Spanish language resources in the New York Public Library (Salem, 2021). From 1941-1967, Chicago-based African American librarian Charlemae Hill Rollins wrote three editions of a reader's guide to "Negro life and literature" for the National Council of Teachers of English (Salem, 2021). Divided by time and place, such efforts point to the long and often lonely struggle to improve representation of marginalized groups in American children's literature.

In the United States, a broader push for diversity in children's literature emerged in the 1960s alongside the Civil Rights Movement. In the previous decade, publishers had churned out books featuring Whites partly because market research showed that people of color would read books about Whites, but not vice versa (Short, 2018). Consequently, by 1965, when reviewer Nancy Larrick made a landmark analysis of more than 5,000 children's books for the *Saturday*

Review, she discovered “an all-White world of children’s literature” (Chaudhri, 2017, p. 5). A year later, after eye-opening experiences in Mississippi Freedom Schools, a group of New York authors, educators, and activists united to found the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) (McKenzie, 2019). With notable sponsors including author Langston Hughes, poet Gwendolyn Brooks, and parenting authority Dr. Benjamin Spock, the CIBC drew national attention to the lack of representation in American children’s books. In 1966, the council began publishing a quarterly newsletter, the *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin* (IBCB),¹ which kept the flame of diversity alive for more than two decades. With special issues devoted to African Americans, Asians, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and women in children’s literature, the IBCB encouraged a broad understanding of diversity (Banfield, 1998).

In many ways, the IBCB newsletter was ahead of its time. Its reviews were written by people who belonged to the group in question, and they were not afraid to call out stereotypes and inaccuracies (McKenzie, 2019). For example, one reviewer chastised a publisher for depicting a Chinese grandparent in a Japanese outfit and for presenting Asian families as overly docile (Banfield, 1998). The council also spotlighted well-written works of children’s literature by or about members of marginalized groups. To encourage minority authors, the CIBC launched a writing contest for unpublished authors on the theory that publishers would be more likely to welcome authors who had already won a prize. The council was right. Though it lasted just 10 years before money ran out, the contest launched the careers of major children’s authors, including the legendary Walter Dean Myers, Newbery Award winner Mildred Taylor, and the first Native American to publish children’s fiction, Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve (Banfield,

¹ As so often, the language around diversity proves confusing. By “interracial,” the council did not mean multiracial or mixed-race but something closer to multicultural. The council’s aim was to highlight underrepresented monocultures – marginalized races – in order to create a more diverse selection of children’s literature as a whole.

1998). In addition, the council developed resource guides, position papers, and films to counter racism and sexism. Its 1976 resolution on Racism and Sexism Awareness was endorsed by the American Civil Liberties Union and adopted by the American Library Association (ALA) (Sands-O'Connor, 2006). Its brochure, *10 quick ways to analyze children's books for racism and sexism*, continues to circulate online, though the council folded in 1990 (CIBC, 1980).

Even as momentum developed for diversity in children's literature, examples of multiracial children's literature were slow to appear. Fans of the first children's book to feature a mixed-race family, Adoff's (1973) *Black is brown is tan*, had to wait 20 years before the next such book appeared. Though the pace of publication has since improved, a search of Library of Congress holdings in 2021 reveals just 225 children's books about racially mixed people. Although there is reason to believe this represents an undercount, there is no doubt that the number of multiracial children's books remains small (Chaudhri, 2017).

To follow the history of diversity in U.S. children's literature is to see a movement proceed in fits and starts. In a 1986 *New York Times* op/ed entitled, "I actually thought we would revolutionize the industry," Walter Dean Myers noted that the 1960s were a time of great momentum for African American authors of children's books. Thanks to federal funding that pumped more than \$1 billion into libraries and grade schools for children's books, publishers actively promoted books about Africa and African Americans, though it took them a while to stop hiring Whites to write them (Myers, 1986). However, when the Nixon and Ford administrations reduced funding for libraries, African American children's books suffered deep cuts. From 1974 to 1984, the number of such books in print fell by half (Myers, 1986). By 1986, Myers lamented, only 1 in 100 newly published children's books featured African Americans.

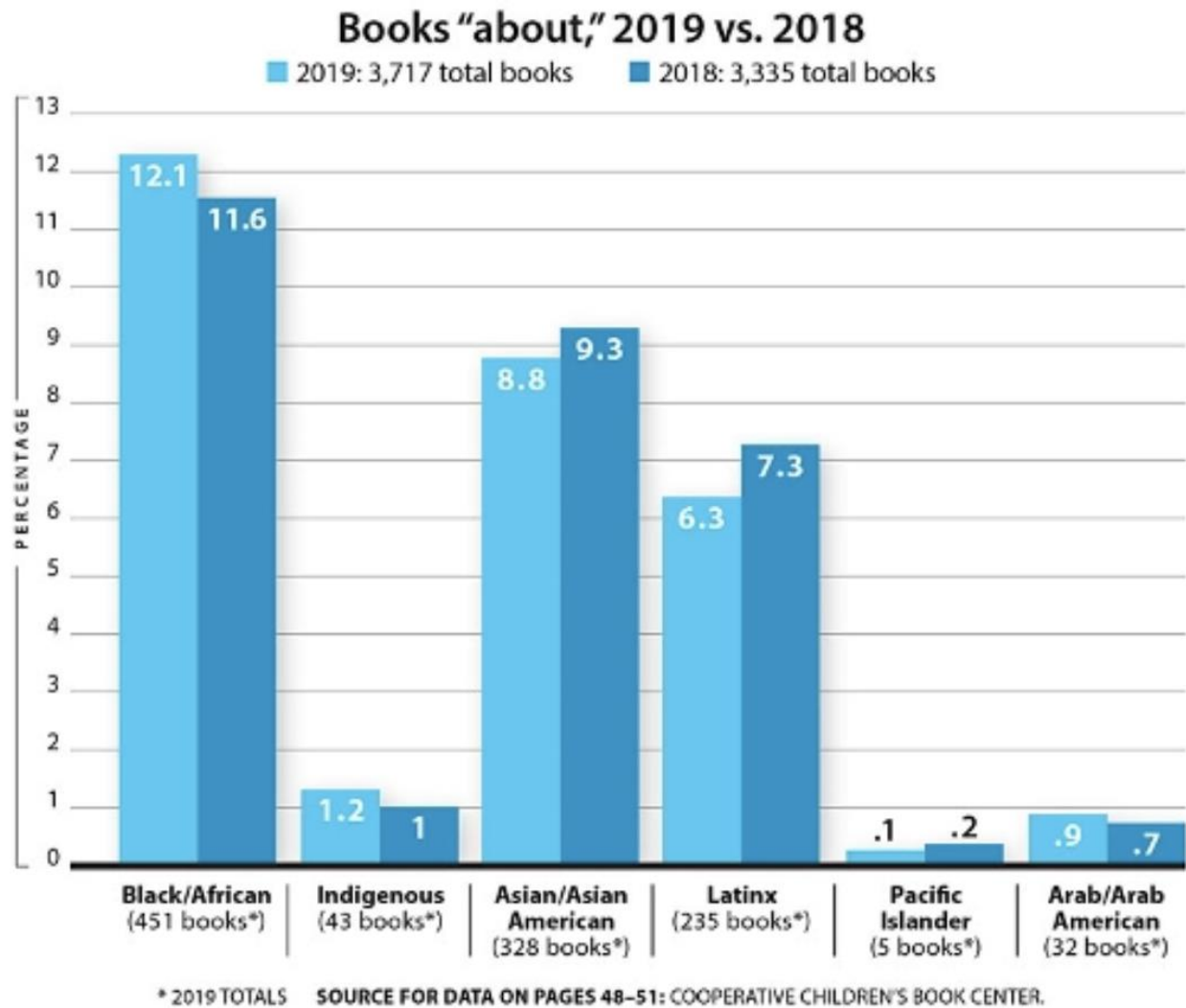
The Cooperative Children's Book Center

Around the same time as Myers' editorial, a group of Wisconsin librarians were also decrying the lack of African American children's books. Founded in 1963 as a resource for teachers and librarians, the University of Wisconsin's Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) had no political mission until 1985, when its director joined the committee of the Coretta Scott King Book Award, which recognizes excellence in children's books by African American authors and illustrators. That year, the committee had just 18 books to consider because only 0.7% of the 2,500 newly published children's books had been created by African Americans (UW, 2020). The same year, a CCBC librarian fielded a request for multicultural books and, searching children's literature under "blacks, fiction," discovered a short list of titles while the choices for "bears, fiction" ran over two pages. Aghast at the paucity of African American children's literature, CCBC librarians decided to draw attention to the 18-book statistic by publishing it in their annual recommended books publication, *Choices*. Concurrently, the CCBC committed to continue tracking the number of African American children's books. Every year since 1985, the center has published reports on how many U.S. children's books are by or about African Americans. Over time, the center has added other racial groups.

By publishing annual Diversity Statistics, the CCBC has become the leading authority on diversity in U.S. children's literature. So dominant is its position that it would now be unthinkable to comment on diversity in U.S. children's literature without referencing the center and its reports. Each year, U.S. publishers send thousands of children's books to the center, whose four full-time librarians analyze them, noting racial and other forms of diversity in authors, illustrators, and main characters. In 2019, the center evaluated 3,717 books, breaking down the results into multiple racial categories and a Latinx ethnicity (see Figure 1). By setting each year's data alongside numbers from previous years, the CCBC telegraphs emerging trends.

Figure 1

2019 Diversity Statistics from the Cooperative Children's Book Center



Note. From "The CCBC's diversity statistics: New categories, new data," by M. Tyner, January/February 2021, *The Horn Book Magazine*, (<https://www.hbook.com/?detailStory=the-ccbcs-diversity-statistics-new-categories-new-data>). Copyright 2021 by Media Source.

Publishers, educators, librarians, and major media pay attention to CCBC reports, which have become a key way to hold the industry accountable for diverse representations. Last year, multiracial children's book author Meena Harris cited CCBC statistics in a *Washington Post* op-ed calling for more children's books that celebrate color (Harris, 2020). Recently, Harper Collins editor Rosemary Brosnan credited CCBC data for helping her to persuade her bosses to greenlight an imprint for Native American children's books (Appell, 2021). Reporters follow the release of the center's statistics, with *School Library Journal* writing regularly about them, and the Associated Press covering the CCBC's latest report (Fernando, 2021; Yorio, 2019). Meanwhile, a prominent, industry-led movement, We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), cites CCBC statistics to anchor and support its mission (WNDB, 2021). Like the U.S. Census Bureau, the CCBC provides numerical snapshots that help observers spot trends. Unlike the Census Bureau, the CCBC reports from a position of open advocacy. It uses the data it collects to urge publishers to produce more diverse books. In this way, the center functions as a moral authority.

Initially focused exclusively on books by and about Blacks, the CCBC now reports on many more groups. In 1994, the center added Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian/Asian American categories. In 2018, it split Pacific Islanders off from Asians, and in 2020, it added a designation for Arab content (Tyner, 2021). In some cases, the number of books in a category can be quite small. In 2019, the center found just 5 new books featuring Pacific Islanders (Tyner, 2021). Nevertheless, the center documented the count. Among its many racial and ethnic categories, the CCBC does not include a multiracial group. Although Americans of mixed race outnumber Pacific Islanders 18 to 1, the center does not report the number of multiracial books (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Since 2018, the CCBC has evaluated children's books for many nonracial markers of identity, including sexuality, disability, and religion. While the center does not include these categories in its Diversity Statistics, it uses them to tag titles in its databases so users can locate relevant resources. In 2018, the center launched two databases, one for recommended books and another, larger collection of titles that it had evaluated for its diversity statistics but did not necessarily endorse. To guide searches, the databases offer many filtering facets, including Gender Markers, Genre-Format, Compiler, Illustrator, Author, and Primary Character. At the top of the list is an area that the CCBC calls Diversity Subject. In both databases, the CCBC offers 21 facets under Diversity Subject, including four kinds of faith, four fields for LGBTQ, three forms of disability, and a field for gender nonconformity (see Figure 2). Diversity Subject includes the CCBC's usual racial and ethnic divisions, plus a Middle East selection, as well as the broad labels of Multicultural General and Brown Skin Unspecified. Amid all these options, the center does not include a multiracial field. For the CCBC, mixed race does not qualify as a diversity subject.

Figure 2*Diversity Subject Options from the CCBC-Recommended Book Search*

^ Diversity Subject

- | | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Arab | <input type="checkbox"/> Cognitive/Neurological Disability/Condition | <input type="checkbox"/> Gender Nonconformity | <input type="checkbox"/> Christian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian | <input type="checkbox"/> Physical Disability/Condition | <input type="checkbox"/> LGBTQ Character/Topic | <input type="checkbox"/> Jewish |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black/African | <input type="checkbox"/> Psychiatric Disability/Condition | <input type="checkbox"/> LGBTQ Family | <input type="checkbox"/> Muslim |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brown Skin Unspecified | | <input type="checkbox"/> LGBTQ Innuendo | <input type="checkbox"/> Other Religion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> First/Native Nations | | <input type="checkbox"/> LGBTQ Non-Fiction | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Latinx | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Middle East | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Multicultural General | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pacific Islander | | | |

Note. From CCBC-Recommended Book Search, 2021, Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) (<https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/recommended-books/>). Copyright CCBC.

Strangely, while the CCBC declines to include Multiracial as a Diversity Subject, the center offers it as a choice in lower-profile categories. The center includes Multiracial as a potential identity for contributors in its CCBC-Recommended Book database. It is also one of 29 possible attributes provided for Primary Character, a searchable category in the center's large Diversity Statistics Book Search database (see Figure 3). In the Primary Character menu, racial/ethnic options repeat the choices from the Diversity Subject menu but add the categories of Multiracial, Assumed White, and Confirmed White. Other new options in the Primary Character menu include None, Human, Animal, Group, and Other Type. Ostensibly, the Center acknowledges people of mixed race only when it considers every conceivable character type. Searching by Primary Character is only possible in the CCBC's large database, not in its Recommended Book listings.

Figure 3*Primary Character Options from the CCBC Diversity Statistics Book Search*

^ Primary Character

<input type="checkbox"/> Arab	<input type="checkbox"/> Cognitive/Neurological Disability/Condition	<input type="checkbox"/> Female	<input type="checkbox"/> LGBTQ
<input type="checkbox"/> Asian	<input type="checkbox"/> Physical Disability/Condition	<input type="checkbox"/> Male	<input type="checkbox"/> None
<input type="checkbox"/> Assumed White	<input type="checkbox"/> Psychiatric Disability/Condition	<input type="checkbox"/> Transgender	<input type="checkbox"/> Human
<input type="checkbox"/> Black/African		<input type="checkbox"/> Unknown	<input type="checkbox"/> Animal
<input type="checkbox"/> Brown Skin		<input type="checkbox"/> Other Gender	<input type="checkbox"/> Group
<input type="checkbox"/> Confirmed White		<input type="checkbox"/> Christian	<input type="checkbox"/> Other Type
<input type="checkbox"/> First/Native Nations		<input type="checkbox"/> Jewish	
<input type="checkbox"/> Latinx		<input type="checkbox"/> Muslim	
<input type="checkbox"/> Middle East		<input type="checkbox"/> Other Religion	
<input type="checkbox"/> Multiracial			
<input type="checkbox"/> Pacific Islander			

Note. From Diversity Statistics Book Search, 2021, Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) (<https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/diversity-statistics-book-search/>). Copyright CCBC.

Given that the CCBC acknowledges multiracial identity in some places, does it matter that the center omits mixed race in other fields? It matters deeply. The center's approach diminishes multiracial identity, burying it where it has little consequence: as a character type but *not* in the top search category of Diversity Subject; in the general database but *not* in the select database of recommended books; as a contributor type but *not* worth tracking in the center's reports. By locking mixed-race people out of consideration as a Diversity Subject, the CCBC suggests that people with more than one racial heritage do not contribute to diversity. By acknowledging multiracials as character types in the same breath as animals and humans in general, the center degrades the group. By excluding character searches from its Recommended Book database, it thwarts readers from locating the best multiracial titles. Because the CCBC does not document multiracial books in its reports, mixed-race titles and authors are denied media coverage attending the data's release. At the one time when publishers and mainstream media heed diversity in children's books, multiracial resources have no place in the conversation. Without metrics on multiracial titles, advocates cannot hold publishers accountable.

In light of the CCBC's expansive efforts to acknowledge forms of difference, why does the center choose not to report multiracial numbers in its annual statistics? When posed this question, CCBC librarian Megan Schliesman makes clear that the center prioritizes monoracial groups. The center's way of serving multiracial readers, she explains, is by allowing them to search on unlimited components of their identity (personal communication, February 23, 2021). Schliesman cites the CCBC's Diversity Statistics Book Search Guide, which states, "All boxes that apply are checked, so a multiracial character will have checkboxes for all categories of their identity (e.g., African and Latinx; Asian and White)" (CCBC, 2021b). This approach reduces mixed race to monoracial parts, ignoring the unique aspects and challenges of plural identity.

Not only does the CCBC diminish mixed race, but it perceives the multiracial category as a threat to monoracial groups that the center has historically championed. “It’s important to note that ‘Multiracial’ is not a Diversity Subject,” Schliesman observes, warning that “speaking broadly about ‘multiracial’ character numbers has the potential to erase the specifics of identity that those characters represent” (personal communication, February 23, 2021). Like the NAACP and other racial groups that opposed the 2000 Census, the CCBC resists reporting on multiracial books for fear of diluting the impact of monoracial groups. As a result, it robs mixed-race children of an important mirror for their experience and a critical resource to find excellent books about children like themselves.

Refusing to report on multiracial children’s literature, the CCBC perpetuates the damaging ultimatum too often presented to Americans of mixed race. “What are you?” the center demands, pushing resources and readers into monoracial groups. Despite its efforts to acknowledge many forms of identity, the CCBC privileges a monoracial methodology that fails to serve the growing number of mixed-race Americans.

Resources that Identify and Promote Multiracial Children’s Literature

In overlooking American children of mixed race, the CCBC lags other organizations and individuals that encourage diversity in children’s literature. The disparity is especially stark by contrast to the Diverse BookFinder. A year before the CCBC launched its databases, the Diverse BookFinder debuted, offering a searchable collection of picture books. With a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and support from its home base of Bates College, the Diverse BookFinder developed a controlled vocabulary to inform its faceted search (Aronson, 2018). Perhaps because its founder – psychology professor Krista Aronson – is biracial, the Diverse BookFinder did not share the CCBC’s fear that recognizing a multiracial

category would erase component identities. Among its facets, the Diverse BookFinder includes a category for Bi/Multiracial heritage, so readers can easily search for relevant titles. Because the site tags all its books with one of nine content themes, from “Any Child” to “Oppression & Resilience,” readers can find books that simply present mixed-race characters and families or books that engage directly with racial conflict. Through its Collection Analysis Tool, the Diverse BookFinder allows librarians to upload a file of their holdings and receive a report on how their collections represent various groups. Through this service, libraries with few or no multiracial books would find this situation called out in their report and could use the site’s interface to find resources to fill the gap. The Diverse BookFinder also compiles statistics on diversity in picture books, and it tracks multiracial titles in its count.

Focused exclusively on picture books and staffed by part-time researchers and interns, the Diverse BookFinder evaluates only a subset of the titles evaluated by the CCBC. Yet, because the site tracks multiracial picture books, it can observe and report on trends in the sector. In 2018, the organization counted 69 multiracial picture books, up dramatically from the handful of such titles produced annually from 2002-2008 (O’Brien, 2020). On March 31, 2021, multiracial books represented 5% of the site’s total collection of 3,875 books. The count is date-specific, because, unlike the CCBC, which releases data annually, the Diverse BookFinder (2021) updates its data immediately. Not surprisingly, the Diverse BookFinder (2020) supports multiracial readers in other ways, such as offering a special booklist for multiracial families. By contrast, the CCBC (2021a) does not address multiracial identity in any of its 21 booklists.

The CCBC’s multiracial blindspot has created opportunities for other sites looking to serve young multiracial readers and families. One especially strong site is led by a pair of librarians from the University of Central Florida (UCF). Founded in 2015, the Diverse Families

Bookshelf began with a twin focus on interracial families and LGBTQ+ families (Kruckemeyer, 2017). Unlike the CCBC and Diverse BookFinder, the Diverse Families Bookshelf does not collect data but simply offers curated lists. Its core topics include Biracial/Multiracial and Interracial resources, as well as Bilingual/Multilingual and Bicultural/Multicultural materials. Fueled by support from UCF and grants from ALA, the Diverse Families Bookshelf is a well-designed and maintained resource. Yet, as a side effort of librarians with day jobs, the site's scope remains limited, its organizers necessarily satisfied to recommend a few, select titles.

Outside nonprofit, university-backed efforts, multiracial children's literature draws notice from individual and corporate sites, especially booklists and parenting blogs. On sites such as Coloursofus.com, Mixedracefamilies.com, and Raisingbiracialbabies.com, parents promote lists of mixed-race literature amid posts on other aspects of parenting mixed-race families. With significant overlap, the recommendations produce a consensus, steering parents of multiracial kids to favorite titles such as Diggs's (2015) *Mixed me!*, Juster's (2005) *The hello, goodbye window*, and Brown's (2011) *Marisol McDonald doesn't match*. Ostensibly heartfelt and homespun, most of these efforts also involve a profit motive. The parenting blogs and Pinterest pages link titles to Amazon.com, providing hosts with a commission for each book sold. Similarly, Amazon-owned Goodreads includes many reader-generated lists of multiracial books for children and young adults, with the largest spotlighting 337 mixed-race middle grade and young adult (YA) titles linked to Amazon.com. Readers can also search "multiracial children's literature" directly on Amazon, which produces a long list of relevant resources, admittedly beneath a top row of publisher-sponsored titles that have nothing to do with mixed-race. On Pinterest, mixed-race titles appear on blogger-generated collages and retailer-sponsored pages for individual books. Because retailers promote titles directly, clicking on the cover illustration

for Krishack's (2015) *Alexander, what are you?* leads to Walmart.com, while Fields's (2019) *Honeysmoke* points to Target.com, and Byers's (2018) *I am enough* ends at Pottery Barn Kids. Publishers, too, market mixed-race children's literature through blogs and online lists. The sales team at Penguin Random House (2017) took the occasion of Meghan Markle's engagement to post a list of its mixed-race titles for adults and children. In all these ways, marketing teams and sales-motivated individuals are stepping in to fill the gap in multiracial reader services left by the CCBC.

Ideally, parents and young readers could easily locate multiracial resources through their local public library, but this is not the case. Librarians catalog multiracial resources according to the arcane language of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), which do not align with familiar terms for mixed-race experience. Consequently, a search on "biracial" or "multiracial" on the site for Contra Costa County Library, a system with more than 1.2 million resources, returns zero results (CCCL, 2021). Instead, a patron would need to search on the LCSH descriptors "racially mixed people" or "racially mixed families," an unlikely tactic without librarian guidance. To narrow the results to children's books, patrons would need to filter by audience or add the term "juvenile," also unlikely without assistance. Even within libraries, LOC subject headings are not much in use. For example, neither the adult nor the YA version of Trevor Noah's 2016 memoir, *Born a crime: Stories from a South African childhood*, is identified as a resource about racially mixed people, though the title points to the centrality of Noah's biracial experience (see Figure 4). The omission is not unusual. Chaudhri (2017) notes many children's books that focus on multiracial experience – e.g., Freedmen's (2015) *My basmati bat mitzvah* – do not receive LOC subject headings that would make them discoverable as such.

Figure 4

Catalog Entry for Trevor Noah's Born a crime: Stories from a South African childhood

Title	Born a crime : stories from a South African childhood / Trevor Noah.
Author	Noah, Trevor, 1984- author.
Publisher	New York : Spiegel & Grau, [2016]
Edition	First edition.
Description	x, 288 pages ; 25 cm
Type of Content	text
Type of Medium	unmediated
Type of Carrier	volume
Subject	Noah, Trevor, 1984- Comedians -- United States -- Biography. Comedians -- South Africa -- Biography. Television personalities -- United States -- Biography.
LCCN	2016031399
ISBN	9780399588174 0399588175
Branch Call Number	B NOAH N

Note. From Catalog entry for *Born a crime*, 2021, New York Public Library (NYPL), (https://browse.nypl.org/iii/encore/record/C__Rb21687029__SBorn%20a%20crime__Orightresult__U__X7?lang=eng&suite=def).

Theoretically, user-generated tags could provide patron-friendly paths to multiracial children's books, but in practice, they offer little help. Unpredictable and unevenly applied, tags are often missing entirely from records of older works. For example, at the Chicago Public Library site, the lone tag provided for Say's (2013) *The Favorite Daughter*, the story of a girl wrestling with her Asian-Caucasian identity, is "Día de los Niños," while Davol's (1993) *Black, White, Just Right!* has no tag at all. While both records include links to reading lists of other multiracial books, patrons see these only because they already happened to locate the record of a multiracial work. The difficulty of finding multiracial titles through casual library searches underscores the CCBC's obligation to highlight strong titles in its Recommended Book list.

Conclusion

When the U.S. Census Bureau altered its questionnaire in 2000, it gave voice and visibility to multiracial Americans. While mixed-race citizens had always existed, the revised Census empowered them with a formal recognition. Reporting on census data, reporters found a fresh story in mixed-race Americans, and widespread coverage of the group broadened its validity. The bureaucratic change led to more flexible documentation among educational institutions, allowing multiracial students to claim their mixed identity. University campuses began sprouting mixed-race student groups and scholarship, confirming multiracial identity. Now, more Americans declare multiracial identity partly because a shift in recordkeeping generated a more welcoming atmosphere.

In effect, the CCBC acts as the Census Bureau of American children's books. With its annual diversity statistics, the center provides a snapshot of the demographics of children's literature. Like the Census Bureau, the CCBC can name a group into existence. By recognizing a population, the center can dramatically increase its authority. The center acknowledges as much

when it makes changes such as distinguishing Pacific Islanders from Asian Americans. Having a distinct name makes a group count because the CCBC each group's metrics to hold U.S. publishers accountable. With regular media coverage of its annual reports, the CCBC wields a unique power to draw national attention to diversity in children's books. The center should extend this spotlight to books by and about people of mixed race. A shift in its recordkeeping would signal and set in motion a more supportive environment for multiracial children.

As a pioneering advocate of diversity in children's literature, the CCBC has seen many groups spring up to join the cause, but none that challenges its crucial recordkeeping role. While the Diverse BookFinder provides data on children's books, including multiracial titles, the site confines its focus to picture books. Although diversity sites, blogs, and booklists bring welcome attention to multiracial children's books, they do no counting and so create no accountability. Meanwhile, projects to promote diversity, such as We Need Diverse Books, rely on CCBC data to support and describe their purpose. To an extraordinary extent, the CCBC and its statistics continue to define the goals of diversity in children's literature.

These goals must expand to include greater representation of multiracial titles and authors. Just as children in monoracial groups benefit from mirror stories, multiracial children are empowered by narratives that reflect their plural experiences. Multiracial Americans have testified to the power of the moment they first saw themselves in a story. Often, this encounter came after childhood had ended because multiracial children's books have been rare and hard to find. To pressure U.S. publishers to create more books for children of mixed race and to spotlight new titles, the CCBC must embrace multiracial literature and include data about it in its annual reports. As the recordkeeper of children's books, the CCBC holds both the power and the obligation to demonstrate that multiracial children's literature counts.

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[quick-ways-to-analyze-childrens-books-for-racism-and-sexism/](https://wowlit.org/links/evaluating-global-literature/10-quick-ways-to-analyze-childrens-books-for-racism-and-sexism/)

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